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HISTORICAL FRAGMENTS

A WOMAN "Y" WORKER'S EXPERIENCES¹

352nd Inf., 88th Div.,
RIBEAUCOURT, FRANCE,
April 23, 1919.

MY DEAR MRS. WEEK:

I have tried so many times to steal a few minutes for a letter to you but I have scarcely had time for my letters to the family and they even have been few and far between. You were so wonderfully kind to me before I left Stevens Point and I intended to write just as soon as I was located as a further evidence of my appreciation but the days were so very full and at night I was so tired I couldn't even think. People did so many nice things for me before I left and I just wish they knew how much the thought of that helps me over here when things are hard as of course they are sometimes.

After two months in Germany with the Army of Occupation (attached to the Rainbow Div.) I am back in France. While there I was stationed in Ahrweiler [Ahrweiler], a quaint little old town which was surrounded by a high wall and moat and approached by four large gate-ways. A girl from New York City and myself had charge of the work there which consisted of a theater and wet canteen, dry canteen and reading room, also a small officers' club. When the Division returned to the states I went to Paris for reassignment and asked to be sent into the Toul Area that I might see more of the front. I had already seen the Pont-a-Mousson region about Metz and had been in Nancy which had been shelled.

I reported in Toul for definite assignment and was attached to the 88th Div. 352nd Infantry. While I was in Toul I had the opportunity I had been looking for, that of making a tour of at least a part of the front where the worst fighting occurred.

We went first to St. Mihiel which the Germans took early in the war and occupied until driven out by the Americans in the big St.

¹ Letter written by Sara E. Buck, Y. M. C. A., 12 Rue d' Aguesseau, Paris, to Mrs. Nelson A. Week, Stevens Point, Wisconsin.

Mihiel drive in which so many of our boys lost their lives. There is scarcely a building in the town left intact. From there we went to Verdun and it just made my heart sick to see village after village absolutely levelled, not a wall left standing. It is just impossible to describe the awful devastation.

Of Verdun which was quite a city there is nothing left. The "Y" operates a big place for the benefit of the few American troops stationed there, mostly labor battalions, grave registration units. These men locate the scattered graves and move the bodies to the cemeteries which the Gov't is preparing to receive them, in which they are placed in long trenches as close together as possible. The fields all about this part of the country are dotted with the little crosses of American graves and so often we saw them right by the roadside where a soldier had been hurriedly buried where he fell.

In many places the work of filling in the trenches has begun and one can trace them for miles by the new earth. Much of the barbed wire entanglement still remains, also the camouflage along the roads. This consists of heavy wire netting from post to post in which boughs of trees are fastened to conceal the road from the view of the enemy. It was a wonderful trip and I came back realizing all too well what war meant but I wouldn't take anything for that one day's experience.

I went from Toul to Gondrecourt and as I knew that Lyman Park was located somewhere near there, for he had written me while I was in Germany, I inquired and discovered that he was but a short distance away. Gov. Morgan, our Divisional Sec'y, was kind enough to offer to take me out there when I told him and I found the whole battery from home in the most horrible little old mud hole I had seen in France. Of course the boys were all glad to see me and as they were leaving the next day on the first lap of their journey home I went to Mauvage the entraining point and stood in the mud to my ankles in the rain and gave them hot coffee, waited until the train pulled out, waved them good-bye, then had the very first spell of homesickness I have had since leaving the states.

The next day I came out here to Ribeaucourt and found it an exact replica of the little place in which our battery was stationed. It is just the sort of a place though where the "Y" is badly needed for

there is just nothing here for the boys outside of that. Most of them are billeted in stables, some in the lofts and some right down with the horses and cows. There is but one street in the village, the houses are built right on the street, no yard nor sidewalk and wherever there is a vacant space, a manure pile. That is the way I find my way home at night. Sometimes it is very, very dark but I know I must pass just so many smells before I reach my palatial abode which is, of course, the best that the village affords, I being the only American woman here. To enter the house I have to pass through the stable but that is a small matter. My room is the funniest thing you ever saw; the bed is a cupboard in the wall and there are three huge feather beds on it so that I have to stand on a chair in order to get into it. In the daytime the doors to the cupboard are closed and no bed visible. There is no light of course but candles and by way of a bric a brac the madame's pet dog recently deceased and stuffed lies curled up gruesomely natural on the table.

The family lives in one room in which there are two cupboard beds, a dining room table and huge fireplace which not only furnishes all the heat but serves as kitchen stove. All the meals are cooked here in one small kettle and consist of a piece of meat and anything else which they can go out in the back yard and pull out of the ground.

Our hut is quite large, wooden tables and benches, dirt floor but never-the-less quite attractive. It should be five times as large as it is to accommodate all the boys. We serve coffee, cocoa, doughnuts, cookies or sandwiches every afternoon and evening. Last Saturday I made seven hundred and fifty doughnuts, quite an undertaking considering the fact that I had never made doughnuts before in my life but it is quite surprising what one can do when one must.

We had a nice service here Easter in our hut. I sang here in the morning then drove thirty kilometres to Bonnet and sang there in the evening.

Of course there are many, many disadvantages about living the way I have to here but the boys are so appreciative of everything that is done for them and being the only American girl here I get to know them so well and we feel just like one big family. There are many places in "Y" work much more desirable from the standpoint of personal comfort but none where there are such big returns in

personal satisfaction as right here in a filthy mud hole like Ribeaucourt. Most of the boys here hadn't seen an American girl for five months as they never had a "Y" worker with them and they went perfectly wild the first day I came. To go to bed at night feeling that you have made a place like this more livable for hundreds of men that day more than pays for every effort you have made.

* * *

Very sincerely,

SARA E. BUCK.

THE PANIC AT WASHINGTON AFTER THE FIRING ON FORT SUMTER¹

WASHINGTON April 18th 1861

MY DEAR WIFE & CHILDREN

It is among possibilities that this sheet may bear my last words to you. I have about one hour in [which] to write, and get my supper and meet an engagement with our Wisconsin friends now in Washington. The letter I mailed to you today I fear was couched in too much confidence. The slip which I here enclose, cut from this afternoons paper will give you something of an idea as to what is apprehended. About an hour ago Genl King met some of us and took 20 names of Wisconsin men who pledge themselves to stand ready for any emergency tonight. We shall be supplied with Carbine and Revolver. This slip does not convey the deep fears entertained. The City is in a very critical condition. Many believe that an attack will be made tonight, I greatly fear it and pray no such Calamity to befall us

The question is not whether this or that political party shall triumph but whether this govt shall be overthrown.

The precious liberties which [we] have enjoyed, guaranteed to us by the constitution of which we have so much bosted on is in peril. The flag of our country is to be stricken down More than this the most prosperous nation that ever existed—The best govt ever known

¹This letter, copied from the original in the State Historical Library, was written by Andrew B. Jackson, a Wisconsin man who was in Washington at the time Fort Sumter fell, making arrangements concerning his appointment to the land office at Menasha. Jackson was an able man and had served as a member of Wisconsin's second constitutional convention of 1847-48.